

Cold Versus Warm Close Reading: Stamina and the Accumulation of Misdirection



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Over the last 18 months I have had the chance to review a couple dozen proposed curricular units, developed by district teams or other groups, and designed to prepare students to meet the [Common Core State Standards](#) (or, more specifically, to pass the assessments aligned with the Common Core). I have been simultaneously impressed by the quality of the tasks assigned to students in those units, and dismayed by the lack of attention to providing any justification to the students for why they should undertake such difficult tasks. The tasks were more rigorous and more challenging than most students currently have access to, and undeniably would constitute a better preparation for the demands of college and the work place – if students can actually engage them. But if students find the tasks too difficult or too irrelevant to bother with, then the rigor will be of little value.

A centerpiece of the activities in those curricular units is close reading with writing tasks designed to evaluate the products of the close reading. When I pose questions about the units, like "why would students be interested in doing this?" or "wouldn't it make sense to start with a discussion of some topic from current events (or popular culture, or personal experience) to motivate this passage?" I am met with reactions that range from puzzlement to disdain. It seems obvious to the curriculum designers that the goal of the curricular units should be learning new skills (in particular, the skills of close reading and providing evidence-based arguments) and practicing them.

I would argue that middle and high school students are not, on average, deeply motivated to learn and master academic skills. They can, of course, become motivated to achieve and can ultimately find mastery rewarding. But it is much easier to recruit students to focus on tasks that will build their skills by starting with engaging questions, appealing topics, and important issues. In my opinion, those are the hooks on which the new and challenging tasks can best be hung.

Why would anyone reject this idea? There seems to be an emerging conviction that starting with engaging questions and appealing topics violates practices properly associated with close reading. The new orthodoxy around close reading defines the first step as reading a text autonomously, without the benefit of focusing questions or orienting information or an introductory activity designed to foment enthusiasm for the topic. This is what I call "cold close reading"—reading a text without having been warmed up in any way to the topic or the task.

Cold close reading is really hard. I speak as someone who learned a lot of Spanish during a five-month stay in Madrid by reading *El Pais* every day; I learned lots more from the articles about international affairs (topics I had already read about in English) than from the articles on Spanish politics, and I learned nothing at all from the articles on Spanish-league soccer. I was a pretty good reader when I undertook this exercise, with well-developed inferential abilities and monitoring strategies, and a very high degree of motivation. Nonetheless, cold close reading was often unproductive. It was discouraging. I found I couldn't read about the unfamiliar topics for more than a few minutes at a time, and that I was exhausted at the end of such efforts.

Of course if the text is selected to be at the right level for the reader, if it is the right length, and if the initial cold close reading generates enough sense of the content that the reader can ask some reasonable follow-up questions, then the cold close reading does precisely what it is meant to do – teaches students the value of struggling with text. But if the text is too hard, or too long, or too full of unknown words, or about a topic that is too unfamiliar, then the reader quickly exhausts his or her initial willingness to struggle with it. Teachers refer to this as a deficit of stamina. It can just as easily be thought of as a collapse of motivation.

So would more motivation or greater stamina be enough to push the faltering reader through the cold close reading obstacles? The focus in the Common Core State Standards on the virtues of "struggling with text" suggests it should. But the reality of reading a text that is too hard without any help is that it often results, not in productive struggle, but in destructive frustration. Such a reading experience does not generate a gist or a vague initial understanding that can be the basis for self-directed questioning and clarification. It generates a lack of understanding or a misunderstanding, and the longer one reads it the more confused one gets. Cold close reading too often results in an accumulation of misdirection – in a reinforcement of the message that reading is about pronouncing the words correctly, which the practice of close reading is precisely intended to counter.

My goal is not to remove close reading from the list of practices used to promote comprehension. My hope is that we acknowledge the range of challenges students in U.S. classrooms are likely to encounter with cold close reading, and that we recognize the need to attend to student motivation and interest by replacing cold close reading practices with warmer ones – tasks that make sense from the students' point of view, that require close reading for an authentic purpose other than just practicing close reading, and that acknowledge the need to respond to the full range of variability within classrooms in student access to the vocabulary, background knowledge, and inferencing skills presupposed by the texts assigned.

Examples of Supporting Studies:

Guthrie, J.T., McRae, A., & Klauda, S.L. (2007). Contributions of Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction to knowledge about interventions for motivations in reading. *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 237-250.

Hulleman, C.S., Godes, O., Hendricks, G.L., & Harackiewicz, J.M. (2010). Enhancing interest and performance with a utility value intervention. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102(4), 880–895.

Purcell-Gates, V., Duke, N.K., & Martineau, J.A. (2007). Learning to read and write genre-specific text: Roles of authentic experience and explicit teaching. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 42, 8-45.